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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that public demands for book censorship are but one aspect of a deep public dissatisfaction with the educational establishment, and develops the thesis that the cause of this dissatisfaction is the contrast in world views and religions of those in the educational establishment and the censors. The educational establishment professes and practices the religion of humanism, in which it is believed that students will develop in positive ways regardless of what they read; the censors believe in theism, in which it is believed that human nature is weak and that people need guidance and protection from corrupting influences. Compounding the problem, educators see humanism, not as a sect, but as an inevitable way of thinking, and they feel superior to the censors. The paper concludes by observing that the way to decrease hostility toward the educational establishment is to permit people to choose the religious orientation of the schools that their children attend. (GW)

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Contrasting Views on Censorship

Speech delivered at the 28th annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Kansas City, Missouri, April 1, 1977.

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You are probably asking yourselves: how can there be a contrasting view on censorship? Don't worry, I don't favor censorship; I am not going to ask the censors to burn more books. What I want to do is develop an understanding of our censors. If we understand them, we can communicate with them. If we communicate with the censors, there will be less violence. Rollo May says: "Violence and communication are mutually exclusive." (Power and Innocence, p. 65).

To understand the censor, we must probe the real meaning of what he says. A writer in the College English Association newsletter expressed this problem very well:

> The public sees that its employees are failing but it does not know what is wrong, so it seeks handles for its criticism. It rides minor points in evidence, important but narrow . . . . (Emphasis added) (The CEA Forum, December, 1976)

When the public attacks our booklists, it is seeking handles; the public is grasping for a way to express a much deeper dissatisfaction. If we probe that deeper dissatisfaction, if we communicate with them about it, we may greatly relieve the tension. I am going to probe those deeper problems now. I attended panels on censorship at the conventions in New Orleans and in St. Louis, and I began to form my ideas. At Falmouth (New England Association,

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1975) speaking from the audience, I tried to put my ideas into three or four sentences. I was greeted with silence. I was sure I had drawn a blank. Later in the day, a man drew me aside in the corridor and told me: "You did not draw a blank; you dropped a bombshell." I plan to drop that bombshell again this afternoon.

Please grant me a favor: try to exercise tolerance. I am going to test your open-mindedness. I do not ask that you agree with me; I do ask that you try to understand me.

To understand the censors, we should begin by understanding ourselves. To understand ourselves, we must understand our assumptions. We do have assumptions, and we are often unaware of them. On the problem of our unconscious assumptions, I will quote from Basil Willey:

> It is almost insuperably difficult to become critically conscious of one's own habitual assumptions; "doctrines felt as facts" can only be seen to be doctrines, and not facts, after great efforts of thought, and usually only with the aid of a first-rate metaphysician. (The Seventeenth Century Background, p. 12)

Let's see if we can become "critically conscious" of our assumptions. What did I detect at New Orleans and at St. Louis and at Falmouth and in our writings on censorship? I think I see these assumptions: we are the "good guys," the intelligent, the liberal; the censors are the ignorant and the intolerant. Now, we may very well be the "good guys," but we will never communicate with the censors as long as we consider them the "bad guys." Our apparently superior attitude will always close off real communication.

But our superior attitude is not the basic problem: we have an

assumption still more basic. The fundamental hostility between us and the censors is deeper than a mere attitude of superiority. Censorship is not fundamentally a problem between the liberal teacher and the illiberal parent; censorship is not a problem between the intelligent and the ignorant. As I said, the struggle goes deeper than that. Censorship is a struggle between our faith and their faith, between our religion and their religion, between our world view and their world view. And we must face up to it: these opposing world views are religions.

If we don't face up to this problem as a religious problem, we may precipitate a worse problem. Remember that religions thrive under persecution. Faiths do not die because they are overwhelmed with words. The faith of the censors will not die because we have won a court decision against them. Our religion may win in court, and we may lose just the same. We may breed the violence of a Boston busing or the violence of Kanawha, West Virginia.

So, to summarize, the censorship struggle is a struggle between two faiths, two religions--ours and theirs; and we are both trying to win.

Next question: what are these two faiths? The educational establishment professes and practices Humanism. The censors profess and practice some form of Theism or what's left of it. The first problem we face here is that the educational establishment does not see Humanism as a religion; it sees Humanism as an inevitable way of thinking. We've got to get out of this stereotyped way of seeing ourselves. Looking at some noted authorities may help. Associate

Justice, Charles C. Douglas, of the Superior Court of the State of New Hampshire, made this statement recently:

> All too often the secular orthodoxy of Humanism is taught in schools . . . . Yet Humanism has been recognized as a religion by our courts. (Newsletter, Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, February, 1977)

Desmond Morris in his book The Naked Ape says this:

> Our schools and universities are our religious training centers, our libraries, museums, art galleries, theatres, concert halls and sports arenas are our places of communal worship. At home we worship with our books, newspapers, magazines, radios and television sets. . . . Like all religions, this one has its dangers . . . it certainly appears to be the one most suitable for the unique biological qualities of our species. (p. 149)

I can see why this book has been the subject of some of this controversy: it could be the bible of Humanism, at least one of its sacred books. But let's turn to Irving Kristol in the New York Times:

> Rather, we have a kind of faith in the nature of people . . . -- and I use the word "faith" in its full religious force. We really do believe that all human beings have a natural telos toward becoming flowers, not weeds . . . . This sublime and noble faith we may call the religion of liberal humanism. It is the dominant spiritual and intellectual orthodoxy in America today. Indeed, despite all our chatter about the separation of church and state, one can even say it is the official religion of American society today . . . . (11-17-74)

As I said before, the problem is that we do not see Humanism as a sect; we have been indoctrinated so effectively and so thoroughly that we see Humanism as an inevitable way of thinking. It is one of those "doctrines felt as facts." But this faith underlies much of what the educational establishment thinks and does: Humanism underlies the present practice of discipline in the schools; it

underlies the establishment of norms of achievement; it underlies the dogmas of so-called free inquiry; it underlies the elective system. Humanism underlies the recent fashion of values clarification. It underlies the rationale of some book lists. It is Humanism that implies that students will not be hurt by what they read. To borrow some words from Irving Kristol, Humanism holds that a student can read anything we assign and still turn into a "flower," not a "weed."

I have spent some of my spare time this past winter reading some of the controversial books. Yes, they are dominantly Humanistic, and in the educational establishment they will have to be discussed from a humanistic viewpoint. To discuss them from a Theistic viewpoint is unlikely because almost none are qualified to even suggest Theistic comments. Besides, the Humanists would object; and the government might even forbid it.

It is time to take a look at the Theism which underlies the censorship we are fighting. Theism recognizes that human nature is weak and that people need discipline. Theism recognizes that students need firm guidance: students do not choose difficult courses on their own; students do not know the truly valuable courses; students do not choose difficult behavior.

In the Middle Ages this recognition of human weakness was called original sin. The words original sin may sound outdated, but the recognition of the reality of original sin is not dead; it may even be gaining ground. Even the censorship of books shows this recognition of human weakness. But there are even more specific

references. Note what D. H. Lawrence says:

> The ideal self! Oh, but I have a strange and fugitive self shut out and howling like a wolf or a coyote under the ideal windows. See his red eyes in the dark? This is the self who is coming into his own. (Studies in Classic American Literature, p. 19)

A Newsweek columnist says:

> The human spirit can be an unruly beast; a little restraint is wholesome. (9-8-75)

U. S. News and World Report:

> Today dissident liberals are talking more about the need to punish criminals, and less about the virtues of rehabilitation. (3-15-76)

Governor Brown of California:

> "Human nature is constant. It is weak. It needs a type of government that recognizes that mankind is really brought down by its own instincts." U.S. News and World Report, 3-15-76)

Every one of these statements is a recognition of original sin, a recognition of a fundamental human weakness; and they are statements from our own times.

To summarize: the censors oppose certain books and certain policies, not because the censors are stupid, but because they recognize that human nature is weak and needs affirmative guidance. The censors favor a disciplined, not a permissive environment. The censors hold that even college students can be damaged by what they read. The censors recognize that many students cannot face up to continuous indoctrination in Humanism. They feel that allowing students to read anything is like putting a child in the boxing ring with a professional and expecting him to come out unhurt. The censor's world view is a different world view; it is not ignorance,

any more than our world view is ignorance.

But one more thing to deepen our understanding: I see censorship as a part of a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the educational establishment. Implicitly or explicitly the educational establishment has promised that with more permissiveness for students, more freedom for teachers, with more money and with modern buildings, with these things we have promised better education. The public sees worsening behavior and poorer achievement. In short, the public sees too much failure. The Theists feel that Humanism has failed and the Theists are a part of that general rebellion that is spreading. For example, the tax rebellion is still very effective. I quote from a report in the U.S. News and World Report (12-20-76):

> Many educators maintain the revolt is part of a broad disenchantment with education that can only be corrected by greater emphasis on achievement and discipline in schools.
>
> A recent public-opinion report by the Gallup Poll and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation noted that:
>
> "The public is now demanding stricter rules dealing with the behavior of the young and higher standards in the public schools."

A part of this fight for better discipline is the fight for more disciplined reading lists. Censorship is part of this same problem. Though the public may not even know the word Humanism, some elements of the public are fed up with the products and methods of Humanism.

Oddly enough the solution is simple. If you want to decrease criticism and hostility, just be sure that those who attend a Humanistic school have chosen it freely. Many choose the establishment schools now under the pressure of a tax penalty.

We boast of our freedom in this country, but only the rich are free to choose the religious orientation of the schools which their children attend. And remember that Humanism is a religious orientation. It is about time we gave equal treatment under the law for every religion. It is about time Humanism ceased being the established religion. When the establishment allows freedom, it will be given freedom. When our people have some freedom of choice as to what school their children will attend, we will have less of the blind criticism we have now.